

24 COMMENTARY ON MACAULAY'S
HISTORY

While our historians are practising all the arts of controversy, they miserably neglect the art of narration, the art of interesting the affections, and presenting pictures to the imagination.¹

The result was that while people read with avidity any tolerable biography that was issued they refused to read histories. ' Histories of great empires, written by men of eminent ability, lie unread on the shelves of ostentatious libraries/ A superstitious notion of the dignity of history led historians to omit the very things which interested readers most,

The writers of history seem to entertain an aristocratical contempt for the writers of memoirs. They think it beneath the dignity of men who describe the revolutions of nations, to dwell on the details which constitute the charm of biography. They have imposed on themselves a code of conventional decencies, as absurd as that which has been the bane of the French drama. The most characteristic and interesting circumstances are omitted or softened down, because, as we are told, they are too trivial for the majesty of history.²

Other conventions led them to neglect a whole series of facts of the highest importance. They looked only at the surface of affairs, and never thought of what was going on under the surface, and this vitiated their representation of events.

A history, in which every particular incident may be true, may on the whole be false. The circumstances which have most influence on the happiness of mankind, the changes of manners and morals, the transition of com-

¹ Ibid. p. 361.

² Ibid, pp, 361-2. Cf. the remarks on the dignity of history ('a vile phrase'), in *Essays*, ii. 256-9.